



Reviewed work:

*Measuring Second Language Vocabulary Acquisition*. (2009).  
James Milton. New York: Multilingual Matters. Pp. 280. ISBN  
1847692079. (paperback) \$54.95

Reviewed by  
Hideki Goya  
Ball State University  
United States

<http://www.multilingual-matters.com>

*Measuring Second Language Vocabulary Acquisition* by James Milton is an interesting book whose main concern actually focuses on vocabulary acquisition and its measurement; however, Milton also illustrates important issues that directly relate to the relationship between reading comprehension and vocabulary knowledge in English as a second/foreign language (ESL/EFL) contexts. Therefore, a review of this book is relevant for readers of this journal.

As other researchers have claimed, vocabulary and reading are mutually interdependent: Not only is knowing vocabulary a prerequisite component of successful reading (Grabe, 2009; Koda, 2005), but also text comprehension is an excellent source for guessing unknown vocabulary (Wesche & Paribakht, 2010). Indeed, Milton repeatedly claims that L2 readers should know a vast amount of words for the purpose of achieving basic text comprehension in explicit and implicit learning. This interdependence has a potential pedagogical effect from a teaching reading and vocabulary perspective, which is discussed in several chapters in this book. Chapter 10, especially, addresses issues which directly relate to incidental vocabulary learning in reading, which has gained many researchers' meticulous attention in the past few decades. Thus, this relevant chapter—as well as earlier chapters which introduce a well-rounded overview of second language (L2) vocabulary knowledge—is worth reading, especially for those who seek to learn more about practical pedagogies to improve L2 learner's reading proficiency.

What is interesting about this book, first of all, is that Milton well illustrates the complex relationship between reading comprehension and vocabulary acquisition in L2. He shows that many studies have strived to investigate issues, such as the relationship between word frequency and text comprehension, L2 learners' individual differences in reading, and vocabulary acquisition as a by-product of reading comprehension. Throughout the book Milton successfully

sheds more light on these issues; he especially offers penetrating insights about the extent to which L2 learners' vocabulary knowledge may affect their reading comprehension and to what extent reading may affect their vocabulary acquisition.

One interesting insight in relation to the interdependence of reading and vocabulary is how vocabulary affects reading. Yet, he argues, when scrutinizing such interdependence, it seems difficult to pin down which causes what. However, in line with other influential researchers (e.g., Nation, 2001), Milton effectively points out that word frequency serves as a good tool to enhance reading comprehension based on previous findings. For instance, in Chapter 3, Milton discusses the considerable relationship between word frequency and text coverage; for reading comprehension L2 readers should know 95% of the words in a text, which usually fall into the first several thousand words of the most frequent vocabulary. Milton emphasizes this level of knowledge as a crucial factor for L2 readers. Yet, as he also acknowledges in Chapter 2, word frequency is not the only factor that accounts for text difficulty, such as in the case of vocabulary used by engineering workers. That is, they know specific vocabulary related to their occupation but its overall word frequency is relatively low. Thus, it is obvious that not only word frequency but also individual differences have an essential impact on one's text comprehension.

Regarding such individual differences, a point which could have been emphasized more in Chapter 4 is that socio-cultural aspects of L2 vocabulary also affect reading comprehension. Specifically, Milton needs to explain further that culturally-shared concepts in the native language and the target language would facilitate L2 vocabulary acquisition due to cross-linguistic transfer which would, in turn, supposedly enhance L2 reading. In contrast, it is relatively difficult for L2 readers to guess the meaning of words whose cultural concepts do not exist in their native language (Paribakht, 2005). Nevertheless, in line with Nation (2001), Milton agrees that teaching the most frequent words early (i.e., front loading) has a considerable effect in achieving adequate reading comprehension in L2.

Learning modality is another interesting area that explains individual differences in terms of how reading would affect vocabulary knowledge and here Milton's comments are pedagogically influential. Specifically, he states in Chapter 5 that "frequent vocabulary is proportionately more frequent in speech than in writing" (p. 99) and "beyond [the outset of learning] stage, less frequent vocabulary is much more accessible in written form" (p. 99). These statements, in turn, imply that more proficient L2 learners benefit from reading for vocabulary acquisition, whereas their less proficient counterparts benefit from speech rather than reading. Such statements are very beneficial to teaching L2 reading because reading cannot foster the growth of vocabulary if the reader's proficiency is low. As a consequence, vocabulary becomes a stumbling block for fostering sufficient reading proficiency; less proficient readers will end up struggling with reading if teachers are not aware of which kinds of learners benefit more from reading. In this light, teachers need to know about L2 readers' individual differences, including culturally-specific vocabulary knowledge in the L2, the learner's vocabulary knowledge size, and proficiency level in order to foster reading proficiency appropriately.

Another thought-provoking discussion in Chapter 10 concerns how reading affects vocabulary acquisition: unlike the more pervasive views of the power of reading for vocabulary acquisition, Milton raises a question about overvaluing incidental vocabulary acquisition in reading.

According to Huckin and Coady's (1999) influential definition, incidental vocabulary learning is a by-product of a comprehension-focused activity with multiple exposures in different contexts. An underlying principle is that the repetition of words in reading is essential for successful vocabulary learning. Milton argues that this view is overextended. He notes that, in most research studies, focusing on vocabulary was somehow intentional: Readers' attention was drawn to vocabulary through the activities conducted. As he points out, it is the implemented activities that draw a learner's attention, motivation, and cognitive involvement to what needs to be learned, which facilitates acquisition as a whole. This argument is also supported by Laufer and Hulstijn's (2001) *Involvement Load Hypothesis*: The more the activity requires the learners' cognitive involvement, the more vocabulary acquisition the learners can achieve. However, such research findings should not mean that the power of reading is denigrated. Rather, depending on individual learners' levels, vocabulary acquisition in reading and more general learning should serve together as parts of efficient methodologies. Reading fosters the growth of vocabulary knowledge and gaining broader knowledge of L2 vocabulary fosters reading proficiency due to their mutual relationship.

When considering the aforementioned advantages of reading and vocabulary development, applying this mutual interaction in the classroom is worthwhile for L2 educators. However, teaching vocabulary is still allotted meager attention and is often not a main focus in the classroom (Schmitt, 2008). To fill in the pedagogical gaps, this book suggests that the focus should shift more towards addressing the needs of individual L2 readers. For instance, if the L2 learner's reading proficiency is insufficient, they need to learn the most frequent vocabulary more directly to be able to gain adequate reading ability. However, once their reading ability becomes adequate, less attention can be paid to vocabulary because the learner's higher proficiency will allow them to infer less frequent vocabulary from the context, which would eventually increase the growth of vocabulary knowledge and text comprehension simultaneously. In this way, the L2 learner would gain a large amount of vocabulary as a by-product of reading comprehension without any daunting memorization exercises, which can become a stumbling block for L2 reading. Thus, Milton argues, it is probably too simplistic to draw the conclusion that the power of reading is overvalued in vocabulary acquisition. It all depends on how L2 educators utilize such relationships in the classroom.

In conclusion, both directly and indirectly Milton lays out the issues regarding the interdependence between L2 reading and vocabulary throughout the chapters. This book provides valuable pedagogical implications that L2 educators and learners can benefit from by understanding this complex relation in L2 learning contexts. However, what is important is not to know which methodology is said to be more effective, but rather to understand how and why it works so that the L2 educators can promote more successful learning styles according to learners' individual needs. No panacea exists in reading pedagogy; however, as Milton states, it seems true that "when in doubt about what to do in class, the teacher cannot go far wrong in teaching more vocabulary" (p. 252). *Measuring Second Language Vocabulary Acquisition* is another valuable resource for L2 educators, learners, and all those who want to offer an efficient learning pedagogy for L2 reading and vocabulary acquisition.

## References

- Grabe, W. (2009). *Reading in a second language: Moving from theory to practice*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press
- Huckin, T., & Coady, J. (1999). Incidental vocabulary acquisition in a second language. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 21, 181–193.
- Koda, K. (2005). *Insights into second language reading: A cross-linguistic approach*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Laufer, B., & Hulstijn, J. H. (2001). Incidental vocabulary acquisition in a second language: The construct of task-induced involvement. *Applied Linguistics*, 22, 1–26.
- Nation, I. S. P. (2001). *Teaching learning vocabulary in another language*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Paribakht, T. (2005). The influence of first language lexicalization on second language lexical inferencing: A study of Farsi-speaking learners of English as a foreign language. *Language Learning*, 55, 701–748.
- Schmitt, N. (2008). Instructed second language vocabulary learning. *Language Teaching Research*, 12, 329–363.
- Wesche, M. B., & Paribakht, T. S. (2010). *Lexical inferencing in a first and second language*. New York, NY: Multilingual Matters.

## About the Reviewer

Hideki Goya is a third year doctoral student in the Applied Linguistics program at Ball State University where he also teaches writing in the Writing Program. His research interests include L2 reading and the process of lexical knowledge development. Email: hgoya@bsu.edu